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By **PARVATHI NAYAR**

HISTORY in the present tense. If this sounds like an abstract concept, Ms Lee is quick to explain that National Museum curators have investigated and initiated practical strategies so that museum visitors in 2007 can engage with histories in the here and now, and Singaporeans from all walks of life can become part of this process.

Contextualising History

Take the long-awaited exhibition of all 477 prints from the *William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings*, coming up this year. "The exhibition will be curated in the context of the Napoleonic Wars, and Farquhar seen as a product of the Age of Enlightenment," says Ms Lee. "We are also planning to have an exhibition of Greek sculpture from the Louvre. This will 'encourage' audiences to examine the objects in the light of the classical notions of the Greeks — such as democracy — and how these ideals were 'rediscovered' over the course of later human history."

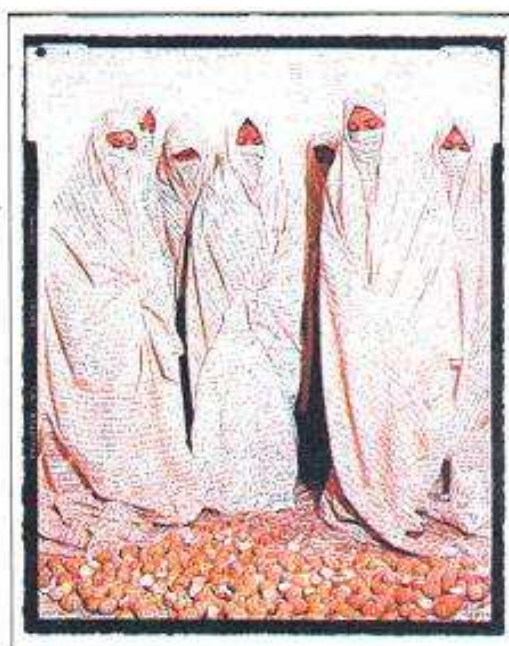
The Aesthetics of History

The aesthetic appeal of the History Gallery and the Living Galleries are not an accidental prettiness, but a strategy that will be incorporated into all museum activities and presentations. "We will use art as a means to communicate," says Ms Lee. This could take the form of outright commissions to artists, or offering seed money to develop work, or programming cutting-edge work by contemporary artists through a relevant historical prism.

An example of the latter in March will be the presentation of the films of Matthew Barney, a superstar of the Western visual arts world. The artist has pretty much limited screenings of his weird and wonderful *Cremaster Cycle* and *Drawing Restraint 9* — which features Barney's wife Bjork — to arthouse cinemas and museums, so this is a rare viewing opportunity.

The Personal is also the National

Currently, the Museum uses a lot of personal narrations and perspectives — whether as anecdotes about colourful characters or attention paid to the lives of ordinary people — which is a great device for showing that history isn't monolithic or linear. The idea will be further explored in March, in a collaboration with Landmark Books' Goh Eck Kheng: a search for personal photographs of Singapore that will be archived and made accessible to the public as an exhibition called *Families and Friends: A Singapore Album*. "We heighten the awareness that an entry point into



Nazar: Arab life and culture through the lens of contemporary photographers

the nation's history is through your own family history," says Ms Lee.

Integrated Programming

Almost every big project in the museum will take a festival approach. Exhibitions and activities will complement each other — as with the two-month-long focus on the Arab world and Turkey, called *Under the Crescent Moon*, beginning in March. "Especially post 9/11, understanding the Islamic world and Islam is so important," says Ms Lee. In terms of exhibitions, one looks at the domestic culture in the Arab world, and another, titled *Nazar*, at Arab life and culture through the lens of contemporary photographers. There are also talks and masterclasses. The performances in *Crescent Moon* also marry past and present in the Islamic world. For example, there are plans to bring in a performer such as Ziya Azazi, who interprets the whirling dervishes in a contemporary way.

Harnessing Singaporean Talent

Last year, the museum's open call invited Singaporeans to present proposals to create work that engaged with history and heritage, for which the museum's archives and resources were made available. This year sees the first realised project from the selected proposals: *Imagining a Geographical Presence* by Ng Joon Kiat, a year-long project that has made use of the historical map collections of the museum.

For updated programming details, log on to www.nationalmuseum.sg